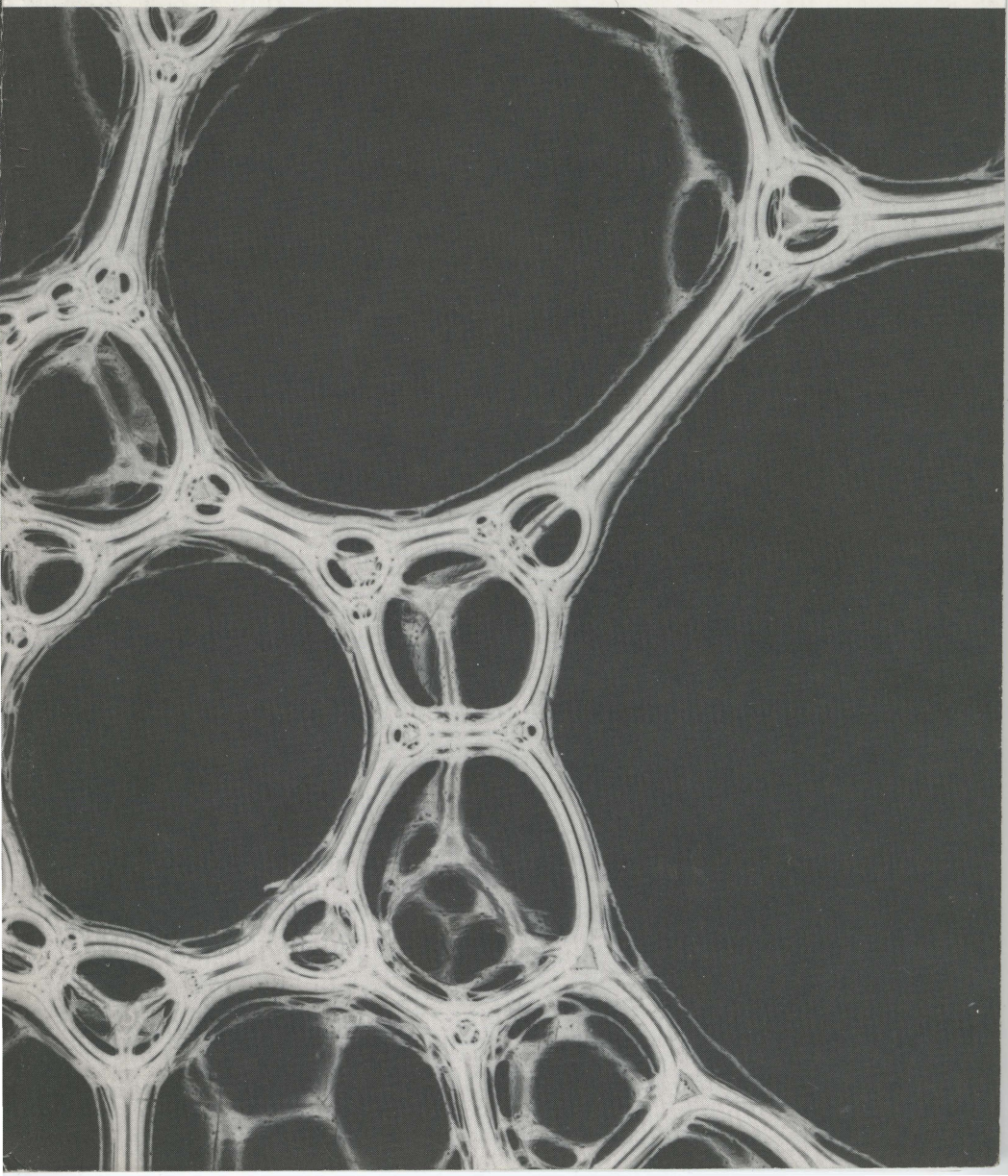


Inscape

Volume XLIV

Fall 1995



Three Poems

C. Lynn Shaffer

Ice Storm In April

We shook our heads at it,
the other drivers and me,
but now I am caught up
as it falls harder, wants chaos
on Main Street, the Interstate,
the bright laden, straight-rowed
supermarkets, and makes the trees
bare down and shine despite
the ever-graying sky closing
in my rearview mirror, rolling
in the way it did that night
last June when I held you
inside of me and slept
until we felt the rain and ran
naked through the house
to shut out the storm, met back
in bed, sat on our knees and listened
to the yowling dogs in the distance,
watched the rain light up outside
until I pulled you close, let
the lightning reveal you, and now,
even though the wind pummels me,
tells me to come out, to open
my arms and lungs to it
so it can have its way with me
like it does with the mossy rocks,
I will beat the storm home
to be taken in by you,
smelling of the outside, be unbundled
of my clothes and, while the clouds
pinch out the moon and the flowers
fold into themselves, we will tangle
ourselves in triumph.

Finding Jesus on Highway 10

The call came in--
woman walking through traffic
out on Highway 10. I found her
wandering, tearing out pages
of the Bible. Jesus, she said,
I'm Jesus Christ and I took
my boy from the devil,
cut into him and forced
the spirits out, like my Father
told me to. She guided me

to her house, and on the living room
floor I found her baby, brown-handled
knife jutting from the space
of his chest. Late sun
from the window burning
her hair, she stood over him,
crossed herself like a priest
and I tell you, I cried.

I've seen a man crazy
on LSD think worms
were inside him, tear open
his own throat but this.
While I handcuffed her, she said
the will of God is done, and later

laid out in the county jail,
arms extended, she sang Guide me
O thou Great Jehovah,
and so help me I wanted
to shut her up, told her
to be quiet. Looking
straight at me, she promised
that I would find God
if she could see the body.
Those blue lips, she needed
to kiss them, taste him,
make sure he was clean,
said she could take

the devil into herself.
I would do that for him,
she said, I would.

Backseat

As I sat in the backseat singing
I'm a steamroller, baby,
I wanna roll all over you
my mother told my aunt
up in the adult front seat
She doesn't even know what that means.
But I knew it had something to do
with the low laughing voices
that I anticipated each time
my mother called Colleen to watch me,
Colleen who asked her stickly mustached
boyfriend over and exiled me
from my bedroom, who sent smoke
unfurling from under my door, sweet
smoke she always covered with Country Scent
before she left and washed from my sheets
just in case. Later, after my mother
White Shoulder shuffled in to kiss me
goodnight, Colleen sidled up to her boyfriend and drove off,
their two silhouettes come together,
like the merged shadows huddled
in darker corners of the cafeteria
on Friday nights, the daylit
lunchroom clamor and serving windows
taken over by the pulsing music.
One night while I sat in a line
of folding chairs, on a dare
slick-haired Danny Beamer asked me
to dance, led me out to the colored lights,
kept his hands skimming just above
my shoulders while we turned
too slowly to There's gonna be a heartache
tonight I know. Resting his arms
around me, he scooted his feet between mine,
and I breathed in the salt sweat scent of him,
memorized the half-moon mole on his neck,
leaned into him for the last of the song.
He cleared his throat to say Catch you later.
I sat and shook to the music but didn't know

the words, tried to place Danny
in the clusters out on the floor, saw him
gathered into a stick-legged group, rescued.

with clapped and brushed. He would be back there without believing. He could
and he did hands and prop up and down on them. Big Thomas tried to remain
these machines but ended up by his side. His chest nearly choking him.
"Danny, we have all under the sky, recognized the new kid, Danny, for
for Mary Helen and Aligned and the rest of the girls. Even Mr. Brown, who had



Tim Harmon

Self Portrait

Charcoal

Trail of Tears

Sean Nighbert

He said his name was Darryl Kittyhawk. All day long on the first day of seventh grade he bragged about being from Monroe, Louisiana, and how Kentucky sucked and he was going to move as soon as he was old enough to land a job on the railroad. His blonde hair had tinges of brown underneath and his teeth were white and straight. He said that his daddy had been president of some company down South but had quit. He didn't say why, but just made it sound all mysterious. The family moved to Kentucky and his daddy took a job at the mine. Darryl Kittyhawk wore a brand new store-bought shirt with wide red stripes crisscrossing all over it. Patrick Anglin said that it looked like a tablecloth from a pizza joint he once ate at in Lexington.

All that day in homeroom class Darryl ran on about how tough Cajuns were and how they were crazier than most, so you better not mess with a Cajun or he'll whip you good. Me and Thomas and Patrick just kept our distance and listened to the brags he made while the other boys tried to match him. We wanted to check him out.

"Cajun my eye," said Patrick at recess. He got out a plug of tobacco and cut three chews off. "He's no Cajun. And I bet he ain't really from no Louisiana."

"What makes you say that?" I said, taking my chew.

"Cajuns speak French or some such shit. His accent is Tennessee, maybe even Kentucky but not no Louisiana," said Pat. We trusted his judgment because his dad was a traveling salesman that worked for the Orgill Brothers. Mr. Anglin had been to every state in the Union.

"If he keeps running his mouth so, I say we shut it. Especially if he's from Kentucky and is talking trash about us. There's not much use for liars. He's so full of shit," said Thomas as he put his tobacco in his teeth. He was the biggest boy in the seventh grade because he failed it twice before. Thom was dumber than sled tracks but he was good for football or in case there was a fight.

"Yeah, maybe so. Let's just see," I said.

The three of us sat under the only tree in the playground area. It was a walnut tree that wasn't but fifteen feet tall. The trunk was only a foot or so around. Patrick, Thomas and I usually spent recess playing football with the rest of the boys, but today was different. We decided that we should watch the new boy to see what kind of kid he was. Darryl spent recess doing handstands for the girls, who clapped and blushed. He could do back flips without faltering. He could walk on his hands and jump up and down on them. Big Thomas tried to mimic these acrobatics but ended up on his ass, his chew nearly choking him.

That day we three sat under the tree and watched the new kid doing his flips for Mary Helen and Abigail and the rest of the girls. Even Mr. Brewer, who had

been scolding Danny Johnson and Victor Crane for ruining their clothes, clapped and smiled before going back into his classroom. Two minutes later the bell rang.

Darryl Kittyhawk was in my English class with Mrs. Stift. She was an eccentric woman who threw wild tantrums when she couldn't control the class. Mrs. Stift always made time for introductions on the first day. She had each person stand up and say where we were from and who we were. Most of us had been in school together for our whole lives so we already knew these things, except, of course, for Darryl. Things began to get out of hand after the third or fourth person. Finally it got to my row and when Alby Jacobs got wise I decided to follow suit.

"I'm Seamus Leary. My folks run a farm about a mile down the road. I am half Scottish and half Irish," I said. The boy behind me, Den Preston, carried the line further.

"I'm Den and I'm three quarters Irish and one quarter Dutch. I was born cross-eyed, my mother tells me," he said. He made a cross-eyed face. So far we hadn't really angered Mrs. Stift by our cutting up, and in fact, she seemed almost amused. When it came time for Darryl to speak he stood up and in a loud clear voice said:

"My name is Darryl Kittyhawk. I am from Monroe, Louisiana. I am one seventh German, one seventh Portuguese, one seventh French-Cajun, one seventh Lithuanian, one seventh English, one seventh Syrian, and one seventh Cherokee. I write poems about the Cherokee."

As he sat down he smiled, and I could see that he thought he was cute. But outsiders couldn't get away with it—not yet at least. The class was silent until one boy said "Don't forget one-hundred percent Polack!" The smile broke from Darryl's face.

Mrs. Stift stood up and took over class.

"Isn't that a nice mixture. You could say you were from the melting pot! I should like to hear a poem sometime," said Mrs. Stift as the class quieted down.

"How about now?" said Den Preston.

"Excellent idea, Dennis! Quiet down class. Darryl, do you have one ready?" she asked him.

Instead of answering her, Darryl stood up and pulled a piece of notebook paper out of his pocket. He cleared his voice and spoke in a rather strange accent.

TRAIL OF TEARS

Bloodstained, strewn with bodies of
Broken women and beaten children
Searching through the broken promises
for the new road home.

Mrs. Stift, whose eyes were closed during the poem, sighed and looked at Darryl as if she wanted to eat him up right then and there. The rest of the class was full of jokes. Darryl stood quietly in his table-cloth shirt. One boy pretended to cry. Another imitated the high tone of the poem. Cyndi Edwards asked, and very seriously, "What was the Trail of Tears?" Darryl turned to her and looked at her as if she were a fungus growing out of the desk.

"You've never heard of the Trail of Tears?" he half-yelled.

"No," she said. She blushed at being made to feel so stupid.

Darryl's lips curled up in disgust when a wad of tobacco-spit soaked paper hit him squarely in his red and white chest. It left a stain on his shirt. Darryl looked at it as if he would cry.

"I demand to know who threw that! You'll pay for the dry cleaning!" he said. Both of his fists were balled up.

"Dry-what'ing?" said Den Preston, in his thickest accent.

Mrs. Stift rushed to Darryl and led him out of the room. He looked embarrassed as she took him by the hand and led him away from the class.

After school Thomas, Patrick and I walked to my family's farm.

"Did you hear about the new kid? He broke down in English," I said.

I heard he's a queer. Reads poems or something. We should kick his ass," said Thomas. He was always wanting to kick someone's ass but this year the principal had told him that if he gets in any fights he'd get sent to a reform school.

"He read something about tears and mothers and babies and some bullshit. He tries to talk like a Yankee when he reads," I said.

"I bet a month a chews that he ain't from the South like he claims," said Patrick. Neither Thom nor I took the bet.

Patrick cut off three chews from his plug. "I say we try to find out what kind of person he is. Why he's telling lies. I don't like liars," said Patrick.

"Okay, I'll tell him to come to the tree during recess on Friday. He's in my homeroom," I said. "And if he's a liar, we'll catch him in his lies."

The week went pretty much the same. There were more handstands, flips and flirts. Mrs. Stift let him hang a couple of his poems on a wall in the classroom. That Friday was Parents' Day and a huge empty calendar hung beside the homeroom door. Only one space was filled in for the afternoon, a Mrs. Isabella Kittyhawk. In the morning Darryl was wearing a long sleeve buttondown shirt with tie down collars. He sat quietly in the back of homeroom and spoke to no one. When I slapped his shoulder to get his attention he winced.

"We, that is me and Pat, thought maybe you'd like to run around with us at recess," I said.

He looked up with eyes that had baggy circles under them.

"Sure," he said, "under that tree right? During the first recess. My mom's coming for lunchtime."

"Yeah," I said. He turned back towards the window and drew circles in his composition book.

When the bell rang for break I walked out into the courtyard. Almost the entire class was in the football field playing Freeze Tag. Patrick and Thomas were under the tree. Darryl walked out from the building and up to us. We introduced ourselves. Darryl declined a chew from Patrick with a sour grimace.

"Where'd you go after English Monday?" I said. "Back in classes. You must have missed me," he said with a nervous grin.

"Why don't you do a flip?" said Thomas. He was trying to stand on his hands the way Darryl'd done the day before.

"Not today," said Darryl. "I have my good clothes on and my mom's coming for lunch." Thomas fell on his ass and quietly looked at Darryl.

"What'd you have?" said Patrick.

"What'd I have when?" replied Darryl.

"After you left English the other day."

"Is this twenty questions? Maybe I had none of your business," said Darryl.

Patrick walked towards him. He didn't like smart-mouths.

"I wanted to know's all. There a problem?" said Patrick. Thomas walked up behind him and stood for a minute before trying another handstand. Darryl shook his head.

"You really from Louisiana?" asked Thomas after he flopped onto his ass.

"I was born there," said Darryl.

"But not raised there?" I asked.

"No, I was raised in Louisville," he said.

Patrick pushed him.

"Goddamned liar. Here you badmouthed Kentucky yesterday and you from here. And you lie about being from Louisiana. Well, fuck you! And fuck them Cajuns too!" he said.

Darryl turned his back and calmly started to walk away. Patrick hadn't gotten to him. But that's when I noticed the shoes. They were white suede, the kind that rich people call "Bucks." He was high stepping so as not to get any grass on them. I saw this and ran at him from behind, shoulder bumped him and he went flying to the ground. Surprisingly the new kid remained clean. The three of us formed a circle around Darryl and started to sing "Don't mess with my blue suede shoes." When he started to get up I pushed him into Thomas, who tackled him hard and really ground him good. To Darryl's horror one of the shoes had a terrible grass stain on it. He took it off and sat on the ground trying to clean it.

"These shoes cost a hundred dollars. My dad will kill me," he managed to get out. He took the other shoe off and hung them around his neck. As Darryl got up he assumed a fighter's stance. "I'll fight one of you, but not all," he said as he got up. Thomas charged him like a bull and knocked him to the ground. Then he took

the shoes from Darryl's neck, ran over and tossed them into the tree, tangling them up in the branches.

"What did I do to you guys?" said Darryl. He was getting up slowly.

"You're a liar. I have algebra with you and you wasn't in class Monday, I heard Mrs. Wemby call you absent. And you badmouthed us. And we just don't like you," said Patrick.

Patrick swung at Darryl and missed. On the return, Darryl hit him with an uppercut that knocked him down. He kicked Patrick a few times in the chest before I hit him from behind. He went down like lead and I climbed on his chest and punched his face a few times.

"Goddamn, where's that Cajun bad ass now?" I said.

Thomas pulled me off when he saw the blood running out of Darryl's nose. He pulled me over to where Patrick lay, holding his chest. Darryl got up as if nothing had happened and went to the tree to try and find his shoes.

"You all right Pat?" I said.

"Yeah, I think so," he said. His lip was swelling up and began to bleed a little. He was still trying to catch his wind.

We pulled Patrick up and we started to walk towards the tree. When Darryl saw us he lifted himself into the branches with great ease. Thomas reached his shirt tail and ripped his shirt open to the chest.

"Patrick, Seamus, what did I ever do?" he yelled from his Perch.

"Fuck you," said Patrick. His lip was swollen purple. I could tell by the look in his eye that Darryl was in for it if he ever got down from there.

"There ain't much use for liars," Thomas said with a hint of true disappointment.

Darryl sat and tried to untie the knot that was tied into his shoestring. He was definitely more worried about the shoes than the asskicking we planned on giving him. The crowd of boys that had been playing tag ran over to the tree.

"Let me down you guys. Don't be such assholes. My mom . . ." said Darryl. He had a look that was a mixture of anger and fear, but I knew he wasn't afraid of us.

"Cry your way out, Mr. Cajun," said Patrick. "I don't see any Cajun bad-ass to save you now, eh Mr. Louisian'." The crowd of boys started circling the tree and chanting "Cry your way out, baby!" Darryl was furiously trying to untie his shoes and shouting at us to shut up. And that's when she arrived.

She was a woman with long black hair who weighed maybe two hundred fifty pounds. She was bigger than the biggest teacher at R.S. 16. Her arms rippled with muscles as she parted the sea of seventh grade boys and made her way to the tree trunk where Pat and I were standing. With more ease than any man, this woman lifted me and Patrick out of her way and looked up into the tree.

"Come down from there, now," she said to Darryl.

"We were just playing, right guys?" said Darryl. He was frantically trying to button the ruins of his shirt. The glare of that woman's face dared any of us to answer him.

"Now, Darryl," she said. Mrs. Kittyhawk never changed her tone of voice during this whole time. She seemed calm, even if she was grim as death.

"But mom, it's okay. We're just having," he said as she cleared her throat. At this signal Darryl forgot his shoes and quickly lowered himself from the tree. His shoes were still tangled in one of the branches. Darryl took his mother's hand as they walked through the crowd and towards a rusty gray pickup.

"Your father will be upset," was the last thing I heard her say as they got to the truck. Darryl looked back at the tree and the silent crowd of boys standing under it. The bell rang for recess to be over. One of the girls ran to get Mr. Brewer, the principal. Patrick and I knew we'd be paddled by him for fighting and decided not to hang around for it. We left school and ran all the way to the Anglin farm.

I thought we were safe in the barn until we heard the bellows of Mr. Anglin. He was yelling for Patrick. We were in the loft behind the hay bales when he came into the barn.

"Patrick, Goddamnit, get down here," yelled Mr. Anglin. He was a huge man who was strong from years of carrying suit cases full of plumbing parts and catalogs. Patrick's father stood directly below the loft with a strap. We could hear him cracking it as he waited. Patrick closed his eyes for a minute then stood up and walked towards the ladder.

"Get down here, boy. Brewer called from school. We got a problem," said Mr. Anglin as he cracked that strap.

I watched as Patrick descended the ladder until his head was out of view. I didn't dare move because Mr. Anglin was as likely to whip me as he would his own son. I heard Patrick start to say something that was cut off by a loud crack and then a muffled thump.

"Get up and go out to the back," Mr. Anglin said. After a moment I heard the scuffle of Patrick's feet.

Patrick said nothing now, because he knew nothing could help him.

I peered over the bales of hay to the back door and saw his hands under the door trying to open it. His father was yelling at the top of his lungs; most of the time I couldn't understand him. I heard him pick Patrick off of the ground and slam him into the door. The boy was quiet. That was when I decided to break for it. I was down the ladder when I heard his father yelling: "Where the fuck did you learn to act like that? Was it that Thomas? Never mind because I'll teach it out of you."

I saw dust cloud up from under the door where Mr. Anglin was yelling at Patrick, and doing God-knows-what else, and started to run as fast as I could from that place. I hoped that my father would be a little better, but probably he

wouldn't be. As I rounded the dirt road that led behind house, I saw the lights on in the barn and a strange car in the drive. The house was silent. I hid outside until I heard the car door slam and then stole into the back door. My father sat at the kitchen table waiting for me.

"We was beginning to wonder if you'd spend the night out there," he said. His fingers drummed the table. My mother came in from the hallway and sat down next to him.

I started to open my mouth to explain when my mother put her fingers to her lips.

"Mr. Brewer just left here—but you know that. Do you know what kind of day I've had already?" he said.

I couldn't answer him.

"I'll not have you acting like that redneck Anglin," my mother cut in.

"I had to tell him that I'd talk to you later and have him tell me that I can't control my own son—a boy!" He was beginning to get angry.

My father stood up and took me roughly by the shoulder. He bit down on his bottom lip, then he said, "Go on out to the barn Seamus. Stop at the tree."

He always made me cut my own switches out of a cherry tree in our yard. If they were too little, he'd cut a big one and make it hurt. So I cut a limber branch, one that would be big enough, and walked out to the dusty black barn and waited. In the quiet hush of nightfall I could hear him cracking his knuckles as he walked to the barn. My father was completely silent as he picked up the switch . . .

Before we left that barn my father made me swear to apologize to Darryl the next Monday but I never got the chance. Mrs. Stift said he had changed schools. We never saw him again.

The shoes hung in the tree until Patrick climbed up and cut them out. In the few weeks that passed they had weathered so that the suede was smooth as leather. He wore them as a joke for a few days, until no one laughed anymore. I never could laugh at the hundred dollar shoes again.

Cyndi Edwards gave a report on the Trail of Tears that month. Mrs. Stift still reads a poem about once a month for the whole class to hear. She still gets that hungry look in her eye.



Teresa Mabry

Untitled

Photograph

Three Poems

Marta Tómes

Lot's Wife

I admit it now, there had been doubts.
The streets always a black bazaar. Men mounting
men, women and their nameless raglings,
cut-throats by six, whores by twelve.

My husband is a righteous man
and fearsome. He fortified our home
and made it an oasis, a safe warm cave.
Our daughters grew like orchids, untouched petals.
When he took the strangers in that night,
we made such a party of it; all smiles and chatter
until the street closed in. Husband shielded
his guests, bartered something beautiful
of his own. But in the end, they saved themselves,
and when morning came, jostled us awake early
to gather the rest of the family (who only laughed
from their beds, and rolled over), to leave the city
and settle among strangers.

Such noise behind, as though the world
were exploding, pebbles leaping before us like fish,
the wind pushing us like sails on a ship.
We were told not to look back, but run, run
for the mountain. And husband's pace was beyond mine.
He tugged my arm. The sulphurous air stung my lungs.
And I could hear shrieks. My daughters' homes
lay on top of them, their hair was tinder.

What could he have done then? God was at our side;
he had always known this. It was my hard lesson to learn,
stopped here, burning, to witness the pure fury
of His goodness. Ashen snow fell for days
like sorrow, or forgiveness. My transformation
is generous. I need nothing but my Lord
who reveals Himself to me incessantly.
I am polished by the wind, tended by the glazing sun.

Fall Sermon

This field in mid-September is as pretty
as any park, rank with geraniums here
asters there and everywhere
the periwinkle the florist recommends
because it requires no special care.
This is the field of the promise
you will not be forgotten.

This is not a field for you, bony friends,
you who would keep just as well
in the root cellar or the tulip bed.
How can you, swaddled in your satin rooms,
know of this anyway?
How the wind bears away the marble, names?
How the oak roots overturn the granite?
How the children sing and dance an orbit
on the grass . . . Ashes, ashes?

Dear Sadie,

Because my key no longer fits the lock
Because I saw my smoke-gray Samsonite
 leaning heavy in the moonlight against the shrubs

When I read your letter tacked to the birch
When I trudged through your hyacinths, your narcissus,
 swore at your bloody red tulips, beheaded them
When I loaded the Buick and drove to the Holiday Inn

Since you don't like dinner alone
Since the box at Churchill Downs is paid
Since the shutters need painting

When your hibiscus blooms, and your yellow climbers
 put you in a better mind
When you want to get away, visit your sister

If you need someone to water your garden

Love,
Albert



Mandi Kubina

Revealed

High Contrast Photo

Respiration at El Paso

John J. Cox

Rail, road, and set.
All faces stand
with the yellowed geology of father.

Behind the abandoned stables,
the chorus of twenty local peddlers
untangles the interview
of a distant spring rain.

Ascribed wings
control and condition
an arid musk of sandy rot,
silently capturing
the success of the crowd.

Barefoot, through peppered brush,
the villagers migrate
to an arbitrary rejection,
each a tangible sign
of the confusion technique.
Submerged under black leather,
each checkered resident
the aspired samaritan.
Some turn around,
Backstealing the second chance;
an irregularity at workorder 16.
Southsound winds
excavate the buried platinum coveralls
outside the city gates.

Alongside,
my hands seek the guidance
of an interrupted journey.

I watch,
as the blue fire leaves the coyote's eyes.

Far away, the science of America.

Two Poems

Chris Turner

Closing Time

With cold fingers,
I bumped the groceries
against the salty pick-up.
She smiled slightly
and shifted her leg
as the groceries
tumbled flat into
the gritty floorboard.

There are always rumors.
I muttered thanks
looking down at the
cracked concrete under
my feet. Walking through
the rain, I felt relieved
to hear the water slosh
out of the gutters.

Shivering at the counter,
I wondered if it was true.
He nodded his head
as he walked by.
I muttered thanks.
All I can think
about is that it is
almost closing time.

Four-hundred dollars
and a pick-up full
of wood. She was
thirty-years
younger than him,
not much older than me.

Fishing Wolfe Creek, Eastern Kentucky

He sees the black pool that looms ahead.

A large oak has fallen across the creek
and dammed the withering flow.

He steps onto a rusty car door and threads
a twisting worm onto his hook.

The thin line is barely visible against
and blackish water.

An RC can floats by and lodges against
the dam.

The line goes taut. Jerk. Reel. A fight.
The fiberglass rod curves and strains
as he steps on a piece of sheet metal
and turns the drag off.

With one high arch, he plops the fish
onto the bank. Churning and gasping,
it rolls itself into the sand.

He lifts the fish and grabs it behind the fins.

Unusual. A chub minnow. Too skinny.

He peers closely at the little pink horns
that dot the minnow's head.

He gives the hook a twist and dislodges it
quickly. He looks again
and then flips the fish into the water.

For a moment it is still,
and then it darts around a Clorox bottle
and disappears into the pool.

Unmailed Letters

Betsy Sandlin

Those rare occasions when I'm home
she still comes in at night
to see if I'm breathing okay—
I hear her warm fuzzy slippers
slapping across bathroom tile,
searching for an aspirin.

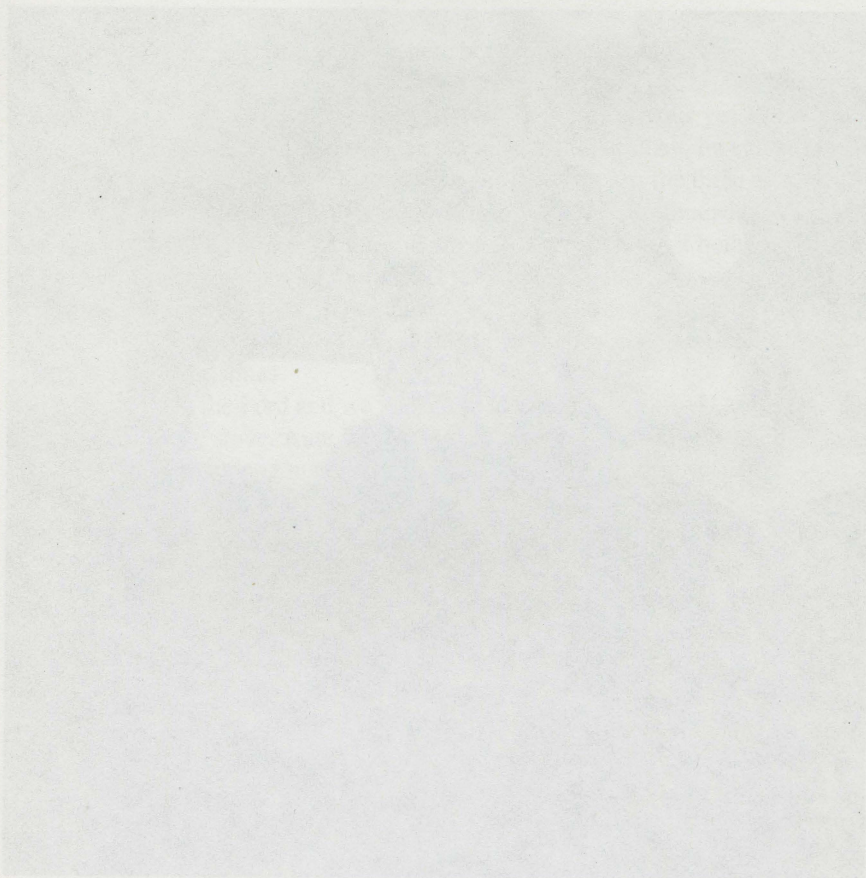
I always wondered why
the bumps on her spine
stood out so much more
than mine
and why her hands
felt like sandpaper
against my forehead.

Her hair is silver now—
she used to buy boxes of color
to hide her years,
but the lines in her rare smile
have convinced her to stop trying.

She worries too much to eat now,
nibbles on dry Cheerios
straight from the box,
waiting up for my sister at one a.m.
years of waking before sunrise
have taught her not to sleep at night—
napping her only hobby
and the couch her favorite bed.

She still sends me stamps in the mail
subtle hints
so I won't forget her—
how she trudges home daily
after hours of slumping
over a steaming press
how she comes home
to a house that's falling down

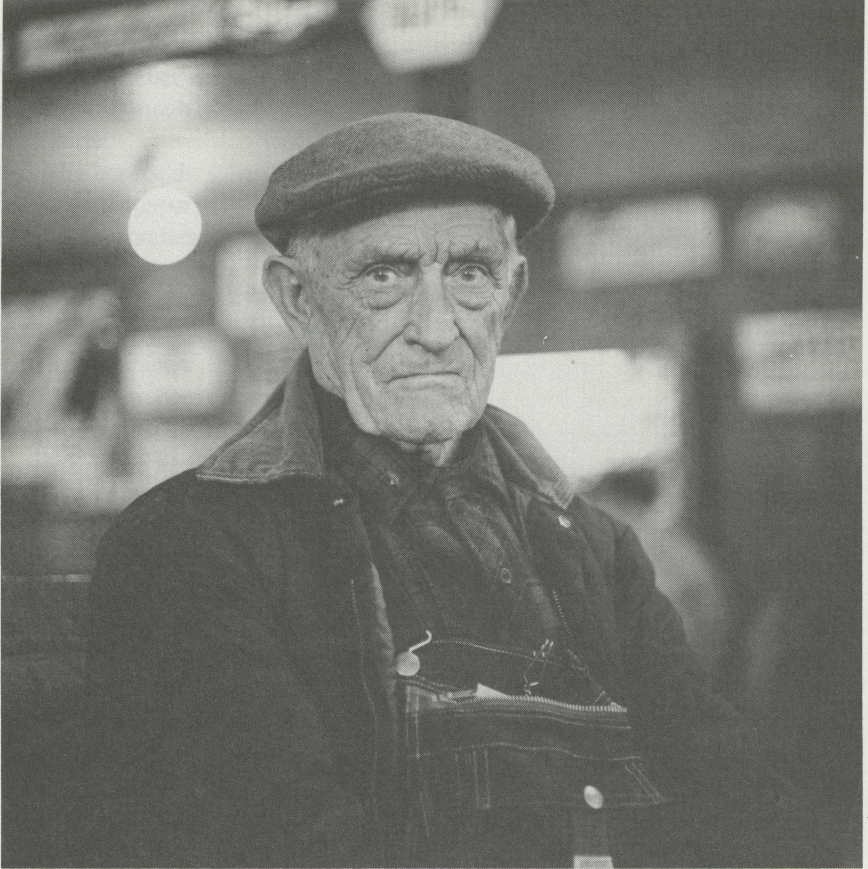
and cupboards that never seem full
only to find an empty mailbox,
without a hello from her daughter—
the one who gets too caught up in herself
to remember how it hurts her mother to live.



Unmailed Letters

By Terry O'Connell

It's a sad story, the one of an elderly man who has spent his life in a world of his own making. He is a man who has lived a life of hardship and struggle, and he is now a man who is alone. He is a man who has lived a life of hardship and struggle, and he is now a man who is alone. He is a man who has lived a life of hardship and struggle, and he is now a man who is alone.



Teresa Mabry

Charlie Stamper

Photograph

Christmas at Grandpa's

Chuck Johnson

Dad wheeled the Ford off the road and up the steep driveway toward the house. I could see the smoke from the fireplace and the lights creeping through the windows. The Ford easily navigated the incline despite the two or three inches of snow already on the ground. The four high gearing helped out when roads were bad like this, but Dad always said his driving skills and other minor things got us where we were going.

"Good tires," he muttered.

We'd never spent Christmas up here before. We almost didn't this year because of the weather forecast. This was gonna be the first Christmas since Grandma died. I knew that was why we were coming here this year. Mom thought Dad might like to be here, and though a little hesitant, he agreed. Dad wasn't much on Christmas. Oh sure, he liked the ones just the three of us spent together. But I don't think he liked the idea of having to go somewhere to spend a holiday. Dad liked things simple and uncomplicated. I think it bothered him that our house wasn't big enough for all his family to visit us.

The headlights moved across the roof of the house as we crested the top of the driveway. The snow was starting to fall again. I hoped it would be a lot. I'd never seen a white Christmas.

Dad parked the Ford and we walked to the house. The box I carried had food so I put it on the stove. Aunt Beth was standing there with outstretched arms.

"Hello there, young man. What'd yore mommy make this year?"

"Turkey, potato salad, and some dressin'."

"Now, what grade are you in this year?"

"Third grade," Mom said, answering for me. "And a straight 'A' student, too."

"Lord, ye've grown so much. When was last time I seen ye?"

"Thanksgivin'," I said, as I went with Dad to the living room where the men were. I hoped there would at least be one kid here my age, but I wasn't counting on it. There didn't seem to be anybody my age from Dad's side of the family.

Uncle Charles was there, and Dad's cousin Greg, and somebody named Arnold that I'd never seen before who had funny looking hair. He was asking if I had been out hitchhiking and Dad had picked me up to get me out of the snow.

"No sir," I said as Dad put his arm around my shoulder. Dad explained that Arnold was my great uncle. I guess Arnold was just poking a little fun, his way of saying hello to someone my age.

"Say high to Grandpa, son. Then we'll go eat."

I walked over to Grandpa. He sat in that old, green recliner where he always sat.

That thing looked older than him. Dad always joked that it was the prototype

recliner. Grandpa said that it was the only one that his butt fit.

He looked the same as last time I saw him. His hair was a little mussed, he looked like he hadn't shaved in about three days, and he was wearin' pajamas and house shoes.

"Hello, young man," he said with a serious voice.

"Hi."

"Glad you could make it. Hope the roads weren't too bad?"

"No sir."

Grandpa nodded his head approvingly. "Well, go on in the kitchen and eat. There's time for jawin' later."

"Yes sir," I said, and ran to the kitchen."

Good lookin' boy you got there, Bobby," I heard someone say. Sounded like Charles. He was who Dad was named after. He was Grandpa's little brother and only a couple of years older than Dad. I think that when they were in high school they ran around together a lot. Mom likes to talk about those days, sometimes. But Dad thinks that talk like that will influence me in the wrong way.

We sat in the kitchen, Mom, Aunt Beth and me. The men stayed in the living room with Grandpa. He rarely got out of that recliner, and there usually wasn't room at the table for everybody anyway. The women would make sure the men had what they needed, then when they finished waiting on the men, they ate by themselves in the kitchen.

Mom's turkey was perfect. Aunt Beth wanted everyone to try the cranberry salad she made, but I hated the slimy stuff and wasn't about to. When I thought nobody was looking, I scraped it off my plate and some of it fell on the floor. Of course, Mom saw. "Pick that up," she said. "Use yore napkin," she added. I got out of my chair and on one knee so I could do a good job and get all the goo. I didn't want some unsuspecting animal to come in here and be expected to eat the stuff, or for someone to slip on it by mistake. Either way could prove fatal.

That's when I saw the underside of the kitchen table, and remembered. It was a drawing I made that I forgot about. I sat under there one day when Grandma was making apple pies, gotten out my crayons and drawn a masterpiece. It was a train. There was an engine, a couple of passenger cars, coal cars, and a red caboose. I made it so you could remove a passenger car by taking out the leaf. I used a whole red crayon on that caboose. I couldn't believe it was still there. It just sat there, hidden underneath the table top.

I finished with the goo, and threw the napkins I had used in the trash. I had one last bite of turkey and got up from the table to watch the snow come down.

This was going to be a long night, a night of listening to the adults tell about their past experiences and not bothering to explain things to me so I could understand what they were talking about. I was the only kid here, it was Christmas eve, and I had to make the best of it.

I got out the best gift I'd gotten so far this year: a rubber-band airplane that flew like a bird. It was folded up in my jacket pocket. You just popped the wings in place and wound it up with this little crank below the tail piece and it flew. It was too cold and dark to fly it outside, and it was not an inside toy, at least not in our house.

I twirled around and held the bird out like it was flying. At least I could feel the wind pulling at its wings and imagine soaring above the ground, over houses and roads, totally free to go wherever I wanted it to go.

I flew around the kitchen and down the hall to the living room. Charles and Arnold moved to the kitchen, and only Grandpa remained in the room. I stood next to him. He sat in that recliner, staring at the snow, watching it cover up the yard and driveway. I thought about the snow, and I thought about the bird and I thought about Grandpa stuck in that awful green recliner.

He finally said, "Yore Grandma always loved the snow. You like the snow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yore Grandma used to always say she'd ruther have snow than rain any day. Rain in the winter made mud. Snow just made snow. And icicles."

He leaned over and spat in a coffee can. Grandpa always had a chew after he ate. He had an old coffee can he used which sat between the wall and the recliner. He adjusted himself in his seat and cocked his head to one side.

"Now, what's that?"

"It's a bird. You wind it up an' it flies. " I wound up the crank a little and let it go. The wings flapped and the bird tried to free itself from my grip.

"How far you reckon it'll go?" he asked.

"I just got it this mornin'. I've never flown it before."

"Just got it this mornin'? With tomorrow Christmas?"

"Mom and Dad and me already opened our gifts from each other. We always open them on Christmas eve. Since we was comin' here, we opened them before we came. "

"Well, what's Santa gonna bring ye?"

"Prob'ly nuthin'. Dad says we ain't got much money this year so I guess I won't get much more'n what I already got--some gloves, a new sled, this bird, and drawing markers."

"Don't you believe in Santa?"

"Nope. I'm too old for all that kid stuff, Grandpa. I'll be nine years old soon. "

"So."

I wondered where he was going with all this. I'd been told all about the Santa conspiracy by my friends. My parents just didn't feel like admitting it to me. They wanted to keep me in the dark. They didn't want me to know the truth about Santa Claus, the man who could fly around the world in one night. The man who made all those toys with just some little, short guys helping him. Funny how they

still said "made in Japan."

"So," he said again.

"I quit believin' in Santa, Grandpa. My friends told me their parents just pretended to be Santa and that he never even existed."

Grandpa reached around his chair for his coffee can. I spun around again with the bird. I could see the snow falling in the porch light. The large flakes twisted and twirled in the evening breeze. He placed the can back in its crescent-stained resting spot.

"You afraid what yore friends might say if you said you knew there was a Santa?"

"I don't care what they say."

"Good. Don't be too quick to believe what people tell ye."

He sort of sighed and looked back out the window. I spoke up again. "So, you sayin' there really is a Santa?"

"All I'm sayin' is, sometimes ye just got to believe in somethin' no matter how ridiculous you might think that somethin' is."

Dad entered the room. "We just been watchin' the snow fall," Grandpa said. "Why don't chee wind that bird up and let 'er have a fly in the kitchen. That's the biggest room in the house."

"Can I, Dad?"

"Well, if yore Grandpa says it's okay . . ."

"Thanks Grandpa!" I yelled as I ran to the kitchen. I heard Dad ask Grandpa if he was coming to watch but I was too excited to wait. I wound up the rubber band, adjusted the tailpiece so maybe it would fly in a circle, and let it go as Dad came into the room behind me.

The wings flapped just like a bird's. It climbed and pushed the air and pulled itself up near the ceiling. It turned to the left as if it knew the wall was coming, flew past the back door, and came back towards me. It was out of our reach as it passed me, making its second trek around the kitchen. It passed the refrigerator, the stove, the kitchen window. Just as it passed above the kitchen door, with everyone "oooing" and "aahing," as it passed overhead out of reach, wings clawing the air, keeping it aloft, I saw him at the back door window.

His cheeks were red and so was his nose. His eyes lit up as he saw the bird go by. White hair covered his head and he had a full, white beard. He smiled and waved a red mitten and he was gone.

The bird finished its flapping, its wings without power, and glided to a stop near my feet. I ran to the door. I looked out the window. I turned to everyone in the room. They all looked back at me.

"What's wrong, son?" Dad asked.

"Didn't you see him? Any of you?"

"See who?"

"... at the window, at the back door window. He was lookin' in as the bird flew by it. At the door!" It was on the edge of my tongue. It fought its way out of my mouth. "Santa Claus! Santa Claus at the back door window!"

They stared at me. I grabbed the door handle and ran out into the snow. He couldn't have gone far. He had to be here somewhere. Footprints! I'll look for footprints. Nothing. No footprints except for the ones that Mom and Dad and me had made. No deer tracks, no sleigh marks, no nothing.

Dad came out into the yard with me. He put his hand on my shoulder, and we stood there as snow flakes drifted and swirled in the back porch light.

"You really see him?" Dad asked

"Yes, sir. He was lookin' in the window when the bird went by it. He smiled, looked up at the bird, waved and now he's gone. Did I really see him, Dad?"

"You did if you think you did."

We walked back to the house. I picked up the bird, folded its wings and placed it in my jacket pocket. I walked to the living room and sat on the sofa across from Grandpa.

"It's a beautiful night," he said. "Yore Grandma always loved the snow. I never watched it much, 'til lately. Seems like I was always too busy, before. You like the snow, don'chee?"

"Yes sir."

"Looks like it's gonna be a white Christmas this year."

I looked out the window and picked at the quilt Grandma made that was draped over the back of the couch. Grandpa lifted his bare feet and pushed the leg support out from the recliner with one hand and reached for his coffee can with the other. He spit and placed the can back in its tobacco stained resting spot, in the corner, near his snow covered house shoes.



Robert Jeffries

The Guru

Lithograph Print

What's Given

George Barnette

He was let out. His ride drove away down a long flat on-ramp, in the clear cold of 5:30 in the morning and a dark bright Tucson sky. He lingered, thinking a minute on the guy's name driving the pickup truck, who he'd been with for 900 miles until now. *A cajun man named John-something*, he thought, and turned to find his way to an open gas station. "I'll remember him," he said, and began hitching his backpack up while he walked, not ever getting it to ride the right way on his shoulders.

He saw that the road below the interstate was a long and straight one, with not much on it. As he walked toward a stop light about a half mile away, he remembered something the driver named John had told him, about a kid that threw a brick through some woman's car window, that it hit her right in the head, and killed her there. The man said he had seen this the day before yesterday.

He walked in the lane, a foot inside the line, and there wasn't any traffic. Both his hands were stuffed in his jeans pockets, and the aluminum frame of his backpack rode a hard spot on his right shoulder blade that made him want to throw the whole rig in the ditch. His hair was greasy and his crotch itched. His socks were stiff at the edges. He realized, walking, that he was dirty and tired; that he was a little bit drunk, his head throbbed and his breath stank.

When he got to the red light, what he thought must be a Mexican had just pulled to a stop on the empty road, and sat looking up through the windshield of his small truck, waiting. He knocked on the passenger side window and the man raised his hand as if to wave, then motioned with his thumb that he could ride in the back. He threw off his pack and sat on it near the tailgate. As the truck got going, the wind blew bare a spot of the riders' scalp at the back of his head. He shut his eyes and shivered.

The man in the small truck let him out when he pulled in at a gas station. He said, "Thanks for the ride, what's your name?" as he half lifted his hand to the man. "I'm Glen," he said.

The man started on by him to pay for some gas, muttered, "I'm Albert, good to meet you," and went on.

Glen asked the gas station man which way the University of Arizona was, he thought a friend of his might be there. And the gas station man said it's right up this road here and pointed, "about 3 miles," he said, turning back through his door to a brown stained coffee maker. Glen dug in his pack and pulled out a package of cheese crackers. He popped a couple in his mouth and stood there chewing. When the man named Albert came back from around the side of the building and started for his truck, Glen threw two more crackers in his mouth, and on unsure legs scurried with his backpack after him to ask which way he was

going.

He climbed out of the back of the small truck on the outer sidewalk of the University. There were no cars in it, he noticed, and at the same time became aware how many people were on bicycles all around him, even in the still early day. He said, "I've never seen so many people on bicycles." He watched a girl's butt when she rode by. He liked the sound his boots made scruffing across the concrete. He saw the campus brightening up with sun, and started to feel like something was possible. He stopped and tried to understand a sign that told where everything was at on campus. *The Registrar's Office*, he thought, *they'll know something about if Linda's here*, and turned in the direction he thought it was in. As he noticed a campus cop it occurred to him that there were several, and that they were all walking right up to him. He looked at the one in front of him, smiled, leaned and said, "Howdy?"

The cop hooked his thumbs in his belt and said, "Do you have any identification, sir?" Glen let down his pack and pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket. It was a soft crinkled photocopy of his birth certificate, and the only identification he had. The cops radioed him in, they said, "to check him out." They asked why he was there. "You can't camp here," they said, "or you'll be arrested. So don't let us catch you camping here."

Finally they said okay. "The Registrar is in that building right there. You can go see if your friend is here, but then don't be hanging around if she's not."

A couple of them left, looking bored, but the others stayed standing where they were while Glen walked toward the right building. It was then that Glen saw beyond the buildings in front of him, a long high stretch of orange glowing mountains hanging in the distance all around. He followed them back and forth across with his eyes, and then stopped, staring straight ahead. Quietly he said, "D-a-a-a-mn."

He found out that his friend Linda was not there, it had been a year since they'd talked, and he thought, *well, I tried*. In the student center he found a phone and tried to call a friend back home, but nobody answered. He sat in front of a large television, glancing at people in other chairs and those that walked by. He would smile at them politely, as if one might recognize his friendliness and stop to find out who he was, invite him home to eat, or get high, or just hang out with him and talk. No one seemed to notice him.

He got out a gift shop bag with some postcards in it, found the one with a single cow standing before some mountains and addressed it to a friend, then sat with the tip of the pen bleeding out a spot on the card.

He leaned against a red brick building, bending down to tie his boot. From

within the building, a group of people in unison growlingly shouted a word, paused, then shouted another, chant-like; words he could not hear clearly, but figured must be from a different language. He went inside, passing by the open door of the group that was shouting, and found a locker room at the end of the hall.

He stayed under the hard shower just long enough to soap up everything and rinse. There were some other men lingering in the hot water, as relaxed as if they were all alone, and Glen felt watched by them. He dried his small bottle of shampoo, brushed his teeth, and jammed everything back in the pack. As he walked he adjusted the stuff in his pockets, so that nothing bulged out weirdly or poked his legs, and he left the building and the campus then to find out how far away those mountains were, and what name they had been given.

She said, "Well, my name's Gladys. It's good to meet you Glen, now sugar there'll be a bus by here in about 15 minutes, that'll take you over near the park to Sabino Canyon. Those are the Catalina Mountains." She sat leaned back on the bench beside Glen, with her arms folded in her lap and her purse strap in one hand.

Glen said, "Oh. Well. Man, they're amazing, aren't they?" His pack was standing in front of him, resting on his legs. He dug around inside it and brought out the postcards he had extra, licked and stuck a stamp to one, and wrote *Dear Cindy* at the top. It was the first time he'd thought of her in he didn't know how long. Maybe a full day or so. He dated it November 23rd, 1989. He thought about how small the card was to write on, and how he didn't know what he could write to fill it up. The woman, Gladys, coughed and Glen looked up from where his vision had gone blurry on his fingers holding the pen.

"Honey, you got a cigarette I could have?" she asked, looking straight at him, catching him staring glassy-eyed, off-guard.

He said, "No, sorry," patting his shirt pockets, with a sort of grinning that made him feel ridiculous and ugly.

She motioned with her head behind them, along the sidewalk, saying, "You know there's a mail box right there. You might have time to drop that in before you go off up in them mountains."

He said yeah, and stared at the mountains as if they were listening. The woman had quit looking at him. He focused on the postcard a minute and wrote:

*I'm sitting here on a bench beside a woman named Gladys,
who is friendly and older. She told me about this bus and I'm going up
into the Catalina Mountains to check them out. I miss you. I love you.*

I need you. I love you.

*Love,
Glen*

The bus was coming, and he hurried over to the mailbox and dropped in the card. Another man appeared right as the bus stopped, and Gladys and Glen got behind him, filing onto the bus with their change ready.

The bus driver stopped and let Glen out at the place he needed to be dropped. The bus went straight on down the main road and Glen started down the one that branched off to the south, toward the mountains and the canyon. His shirt was bunched up on his back some, leaving the skin exposed to the belt on his pack, along with a sudden seeping breeze, which made Glen tremble a little. His right knee seemed to shake and spring each step back to him, clacking like a small, hopping wind-up toy. He thought that he should eat and sit down sometime soon. About a mile up the road he could see some kind of store. A car was coming and Glen turned and looked at the driver of it, holding out his thumb. The man driving forced his eyes to the road in front of him, and whizzed by without looking over. Glen had a rock in his hand that he'd been admiring and he wanted badly to throw it at the car. He hollered, "Fuck you, buddy!" into the swirling wind left behind, and walked on. The mountains were clear now, with no buildings or wires between, and they glowed a different color than before. He walked on, unaware just then of what all ached in his body, and of what he had been mad about just a few seconds before.

In the store, he had the peculiar feeling that his stare had some kind of weight, like it was uncontestable and calm, and he let it take him. He watched as the woman from behind the counter filled an empty gallon jug with water for him. The sound of her nails skipping clear and light across the plastic when she took it by the handle, and her whole manner of movement, and all he could sense of her, was graceful and perfect, he thought. Enough to make you cry. He said, "Thank you," when she handed him the jug. They slightly nodded at each other, and he went back outside. He said, "So much air like an ocean," out to the blue sky, then followed his vision down to the top edge of the mountains. "I'm here," he said, "wonder what you got to do now."

A man from behind Glen, setting down a ten-speed bike said, "I think there's a little Forestry Office shack right inside that drive there. You going up?" He had a back-pack on and was stepping onto his bike. He slowly pedaled beside Glen walking.

Glen said, "Yeah, I think so. You?"

"Naw, I'll probably just ride the trolley up to look around, and come back. I've got to be back in Dallas in a week," he said.

Glen laughed, "You riding that bike to Dallas?" and saw the man's head beginning to nod before the question was all the way out of his mouth. He said, "D-a-a-mn. Where all you been on it?"

The man talked about how he'd been cycling all over the South-west for two months as they rode the trolley up a freshly black-topped, winding road. He said he was ready to get home though.

A tour-guide woman was telling the passengers that those who would be leaving the trolley, to hike out and camp, shouldn't worry about snakes this time of year, because it was cold weather and the snakes would be hibernating. "But," she said, "watch out for wild boars."

The man said, "Do you have enough water with you, man?"

Glen felt a nervous bubble, like gas, in his stomach. "Yeah, I ought to. I think." The land around them was all white rocks and brown dirt, with small patches of green dotting out across and over the steep mountains. Glen looked up the side to the top of a giant wall they were passing, thinking *god, the sky is blue*. The trolley slowed and made a wide U-turn where the road bulged out like a bulb. Everyone climbed off to look around. Some children ran down a path that led to a stream that you couldn't see from the road. Glen lifted on his pack, adjusting it slowly and looking up a hill he thought didn't look too big. The man with the bike said, "Well, good luck. It was good meeting you."

"Uhm, yeah," Glen said, "Drive careful getting back. I guess I'll go on and get started up here."

"Yeah, well, take it easy," the man said, and left Glen standing alone. Glen turned back toward the path, pulled his water jug around and drank, then started up the hill.

He walked in loose, dry dirt, his boots scraping over rocks, and he tingled with the air there. The path wound back and forth up the hill, and looking back at the quickly shrinking trolley, Glen smiled and then giggled, then laughed out loud at how goofy he sounded. Up ahead he could see the pass around the side of the hill where the path was leading. Just before he got to it he looked back again to the road below, and saw the last person get back onto the trolley before it slid away. He reached the pass and kept on walking until he was all the way around and could only see the walls within the mountains. He sat and looked, wondering how far he would have to go to find a place to stay.

He came to a sign at a split in the trail. It said you had to be four miles into the Canyon before you could stop and camp. Glen puzzled over what he was in, a canyon or a mountain. He decided it was probably both. He thought, *ain't I already walked a couple of miles?* From there he took the shortest way to a place he could camp.

Before long he realized he *was* in the bottom of a big canyon, just like he was at ground level again. He stopped to touch a Yucca plant, pressing too hard on the pointy tip with his finger. "Shit," he said. He licked off the tiny drop of blood. "Hope that ain't poisonous, or nothing." He chuckled again at what went through his head all the time. *Crazy shit*, he thought.

The mountains on each side were high, and the sun was about to be lost over the western side. Glen started to worry about the night. He stopped to pee and then tried to get his boots to tighten up. He pulled the strings up as tight as they would go, but the leather had been stretched from side to side, and the boots stayed loose and floppy. He was wrestling his pack back on, when he heard the sudden sound of someone coming. A jolt went through him, and he jumped inside, just before a woman in some kind of skin-tight, shiny pants went jogging by with a small pack. She said, "Hi," and kept on running. Glen wondered if she'd heard him say howdy as she passed. He watched her pony tail bounce ahead until she disappeared, and began to feel the ache in his feet as he started again. He said to himself, "You're *pitiful*, man. I swear."

Beside a small creek, off the trail about twenty feet, he saw a fire circle made of stones. There were two big boulders coming together at an angle near the fire pit. A light wind had begun to pick up, and Glen thought that between those boulders would be a good place to sleep. On the other side of the creek, the hill climbed almost straight up, way too steep to walk up, and because of the trees at the spot of the camp it was impossible to see the peak. Glen let down his stuff and walked around looking for a minute, and firewood popped into his head as he pissed in the stream.

He scavenged for wood all over for half an hour, but only had one full arm-load to bring back to the fire. *There's no wood here to burn*, he thought. *I'm fucked.*

He said, "Aw dammit," when the baked bean juice splashed and soaked through his pants leg. He kept on jabbing his knife into the lid, working his way around the can. "Can't I just get my stupid beans out," he said, "damn. Okay. I got it going now. And probably about enough fire to get them hot. Yee-hi."

He took off his boots and sat on his sleeping bag to eat. When he was finished he dug into his pack and pulled out two thin white candles. It was close to dark when he put the last of his wood on the fire. He set the candles up a few inches apart in the crevice between the boulders, balancing and re-balancing them there. Too big a swig of water cramped in his stomach, and he stretched out on his back, with his head propped up on his hands. He thought he'd better slow down on the water, or it wouldn't last a day. *Even if I'm dry as a bone, I got to have control*, he thought. *Ration it.*

Aw now, this is alright. I'm doing alright. Yes buddy. Feel like a flat tire. Shit.

It's getting dark. Fire's going out. It's early as hell. Hmm. Well. Shit.

Well shit I might as well climb in this sleeping bag.

There now. Ahh. Okay. Here I am. Now what? Huh. Yeah. What now?

Wonder what everybody else is doing. Yep, I wonder what they're doing. Ay, I guess I know, really, actually, shit.

Well, here I am. Here I am. I am here. Am I here? Hey!! Am I here?! He-e-e-

e-y! Am I here?! Sho-o-o-wy, you're eat up, man. Shit. Ho-o-o. Go to sleep. Go to sleep. Go to sleep, goddamnit.

Finally he did sleep. The fire was long since gone and his candles had been blown out by the wind. Complete darkness. The few visible stars were so far away and faint, that when he jerked awake from his dream, he thought he had broken loose in space, and was drifting further out than the stars from everything he knew. His eyes were wide and he shook from the cold.

All he could remember was what he'd seen in the dream, his father in a casket, pale and motionless. He fumbled around with his matches. The wind blew them out one after another, before he finally got one candle to stay lit, only if he crouched above it in the sleeping bag. He said, "Oh god, god, man."

"Aw, man."

He sat with his sleeping bag around him like a cape, and his feet held the candle between them, close in to his body. He looked up at the black sky, saying, "Be alright, Dad. Please, be alright." His eyes dropped to the flame below and he slowly puckered toward the candles' fire, coming too close with his lips, causing a small blister to rise. He hollered and spit on the candle till it was out, then slammed his head back into one of the boulders instead of the ground he expected. He held his head, ready to cry like hell, sucking air in and out, and talking himself back to sleep. The last thing he thought as he went back to sleep was that it still was not late, and that the night would never end.

In his sleep he dreamed:

A woman is holding his hand, leading him down a bright, carpeted hallway, in a large house, toward a room where people are gathered. She leads him in through the people, who are all dressed up, over to something he can't see until he's right up on it. He looks down to see Cindy, laying silent and white in a casket, her hands folded over her stomach. Her lips move to say, "Here I am. This is me here. Dead." Her eyes do not open and she doesn't move again. Glen stands there looking down, saying, "Oh. No. No. No. No."

Glen woke up clawing at his clothes, in a shivering sweat, screaming, "Fuck! Goddamnit! What the hell is this happening for? God. Dammit! Why?!" Something was rustling nearby in the surrounding brush, and it seized him up. He ducked back into the sleeping bag and shut his eyes. *God, please just make this night end*, he prayed. *God. I'm alone and I'm floating away. I'm alone in space, I am floating away. I'm cut loose, gone. Gone. I'm gone*, he kept thinking until he fell asleep again, still listening for the sound, and holding the cover down tight on his head.

When he woke again it was well into morning. The sun was almost over the mountain already, and he lay still to hear the birds, and the water flow below. The

clear air hypnotized him there, so he stayed without moving, looking and listening for a full hour before he rose.

He stood up and said, "By god, I'm happy. Let's see, where's my boots. I feel pretty good." He kicked around the charred wood, leaned it together and put pine needles under it to get it going. The fire started and Glen squatted over it warming his hands. He said, "Shoo. What a night. Bad dreams. Guess it ended though. Guess I'll be alright."

There was half a gallon of water left, which he turned up and guzzled. As much as he could stand. He washed his bean can and spoon in the creek, and then packed everything back up. He tried to write a letter in his notebook to everybody he knew, and ended up crying in heavens that hurt his back. *They're all so far away*, he thought, *I don't know what I could say that would mean anything anyway*. "Fuck it," he said.

He decided there wasn't enough water to stay another night, so he started back the way he had come along the trail. He told himself to buck-up, to quit being such a fucking baby. He sat on a rock and tried to meditate, breathing so deeply he got light-headed.

As he walked the trail, he thought about going home instead of on to any place else. He thought he could make it in a couple of days. The trail brought him down to the road just before the trolley arrived, and he got on smiling, making small talk with whoever he could.

On toward evening, Glen made his way back to the interstate on a city bus, where he got caught up by a man handing out pamphlets on devil worshippers. The man told Glen he'd better get off the roads and into the House of the Lord. Glen looked around him on the bus, to see if other people were hearing this. No one seemed to be paying any attention. Glen said, "Well, okay then, this is where I get off, bye," as the bus came to a stop within sight of Interstate 10.

As soon as he got out, a van pulled over and a big woman with totally braided hair leaned out the window at Glen. She said, "Which way you going, honey? I'm getting ready to get on the interstate here and going west." He'd been thinking about home, but as he looked at the big brown, friendly eyes of the woman, he thought, *yeah. Why not? I ain't been gone but a couple weeks.*

He said, "I'm going west. You sure you don't mind?"

"Naw hell, come on," she said, "We'll catch us a little buzz, hee-hee."

Glen said, "Alright," got into the van, and reared back in his seat. He said, "Hey thanks a lot for giving me a ride. This is great."

"No problem, honey. I was going anyway. Where you been?"

Glen sat up and said, "Well, I been back there in them mountains, alone. And I'm by god glad to have some company, finally."

She said, "Well, hit this honey," as she passed him a joint, "We'll keep company a hour or two anyway, 'for I get off this road."

Glen looked out the windshield at all the open land ahead, saying, "Well, that's good enough then. It'll last while it lasts. That's a good thing. Alright. Thank god."



Gary Gebhart

Aquatic Tusche

Tusche Print/Lithograph

Two Poems

Jason Griffey

Midnight Vision

The ghost of my grandfather is in the hall,
my mother tells me.
She can smell the sticky sweet scent of his pipe,
like the incense in a Buddhist temple
purifying this space, this golden hall
where I used to sleep in small pajamas
drowning out the summer heat,
and through foggy eyes, if I try,
I can almost see him in the faded wallpaper.

Red going grey, with
gentle skin and pale.
He looks at me,
and I want him to know me now,
to see me as a man, and let me brag of my accomplishments
while he whittles patiently away at a slingshot,
sipping coffee and nodding his head.
I want him to pump my hand after graduation, and
tell the men of the town what his tow-headed grandson
has become,
but all I have is this ghost of my past,
and it comforts me, this
midnight vision at six.

Fall of '79

Only once have I seen my father cry,
when they pulled the cold, dead boy from the lake.

Skin pale, as always
and hair the color of fall,
the red of the sugar maple around his head
and leaves, wet and brown and ugly on the
dull, mud covered clothes.

Jesus,
he was a beautiful man,
tall and strong,
the teacher of play,
the giant who scares the children in bed.

I remember pieces of him,
his hands the size of plates.
He was a mountain to me at five,
who held me high to shoot basketball,
because I was too small to try.

I am now as he was, on the edge of life,
beginning the road to the rest of the world.

But I remember being a little boy,
and watching from the bottom of the house,
hearing the phone ring.
my father's soft "hello?"
followed by choking sobs
of thoughts of brother gone.

And myself,
my five-year-old mind unsure about
why or how, and
"is he crying?" I think.
then and now
I see only soft blue coffin
and bright red hair
and earth.

Whistling

George Barnette

There are the repulsive similarities, our cow thick heads, hair that's apt to mat and greasy tuft from sleep, eyes too small and close together, our noses fat and full of obvious pores like open mouths, asking for answers to the lack and loss we feel. Pores holding puss, standing us before ourselves, the bathroom mirror, squeezing, disgusted, afraid of what might blossom from the vile soup within us; lonely, hurt, dumb. And when I was still drinking, my skin stretched with pounds, it was clear I'd carry it all the way my mom does, in rubbing thighs and heavy ass, loose tits, wrinkled folds of belly, thick neck, jowls. And it has always been easy to hate her for the way I turned out. Easy to send back my silence and distance to smother her assaults, her violence and greed, her empty-hearted clutches, her summoning of me. She believed me to be hers.

It comes to me sometimes lately, a memory I cannot accept, but know is true, it comes from somewhere, it's clear to me and it was us. Sunday morning, after mass in the car on the way home, my sisters, step-dad, mom and me, we stop at the store, it's close enough to one o'clock and Dad runs in the drug store for beer. Sally and Esther are on each side of me in the back seat of the station wagon and Sally sings a church song under her breath and Mom hums it with her softly. Me and Esther jab at each other, furious at the burden of our relation. Mom says, *Well come on Paul, damnit!* and the car is silent, still, waiting. I start to whistle Jesus Loves Me, it's a habit and I don't even know I'm doing it till Esther gives my hair a yank and tells me to shut up cause I get on her nerves so bad. And Mom says, *No Esther; let him go. It does me good to hear him whistle. When he whistles I know he's happy.* She said, *I like to hear him whistling.*



Katie Green

Bonnie

Conte

Two Poems

Debbie Oesche

Grandma's Leaving

When the halls are finally silenced
of mumbled nurses' gossip
I hear your trembling moans
"help . . . hhelp . . . hhelp . . ."
you had tired of the struggle
but feared the letting go

thinning blondes and browns with just
a hint of grey still framed the shut-eye
open-mouth moments you had of snoring peace
needlessly disturbed by Bertha or Rhonda
or Steve to encase your brittle
arm with that black inflatable tube
alive with pumps and gauges

spawning stories of how you used
to take me to the river
watch me roll, roll with the water
my tube intentionally placed copper needle down
bandage the bloody scratches
rocks left on my knees and calves and feet
laughing over scalding cider

"Where's my room? I can't find my room . . ."
echoes through the half open door
Hazel is lost again and you ask
if all the bills have been paid
still trapped in the hopelessness of
a depression 60 years passed

The cadence of your chant slows and slurs
p's dropping
as each exhale evolves into an impotent cry for
"hel . . . hhel . . . hhel . . ."

Alice paces through the room
red sock
green sock
three on one foot
the other stretching limply before her toes
back still erect
mind deceased

"She used to be a UN translator, fluent in five languages"
you'd say
before the chant began

But now
all is lost between
those starched white sheets and
sanitized bathrooms
desire has escaped
you bow your head in eternal prayer

Discarded

Suited in someone else's discarded
sweater, jacket, scarf
he stretches out possessively
over the thin, weather-worn, bench planks
still enshrouded in yesterday's
Washington Post
Clinton smiling smugly
less than 10 blocks away
and I don't have a quarter
for the dented, silver 3/4 measuring cup
placed ominously near the
matted, black locks
of crocheted hair
a sea of rainbows knitted for his head

Glass table top and pink linen napkins
reflect soft tones in the crystal water glass
sprinkled with flashes of morning light
from the splashing fountain
looking out over eggs benedict and
freshly squeezed O. J.
through the rose tinted windows
I see him
awake to the sounds
of teeming streets
stampede of loafers and pumps

Stumbling to the nearest light pole
he christened the day
piss streaming down the grey, smooth metal

I look to see
if anyone else notices
They do
but pretend not to
me hurriedly slipping the gold card to
the black-tie server
pious generosity
birthing 10% gratuity

Nights like these

Matt Ragland

Yes, there are late nights

when the owl glides low.

There are nights when the mice journey high

above their protective grasses.

There are nights when fear's face is never known.

When death is but a word.

These are the nights when life is the richest.

These are the nights when spirits hear the maestro's call

To dance again.

Will we be altered on nights such as these?

Will we remember the scent of bravery carried by the breeze?

Can a spirit's promise be sealed with a kiss?

Who can tell on nights like these

When fear is buried far beneath the trees?

Who will survive to face the morning's light

To dance again yet another fearless night?

Brush Strokes

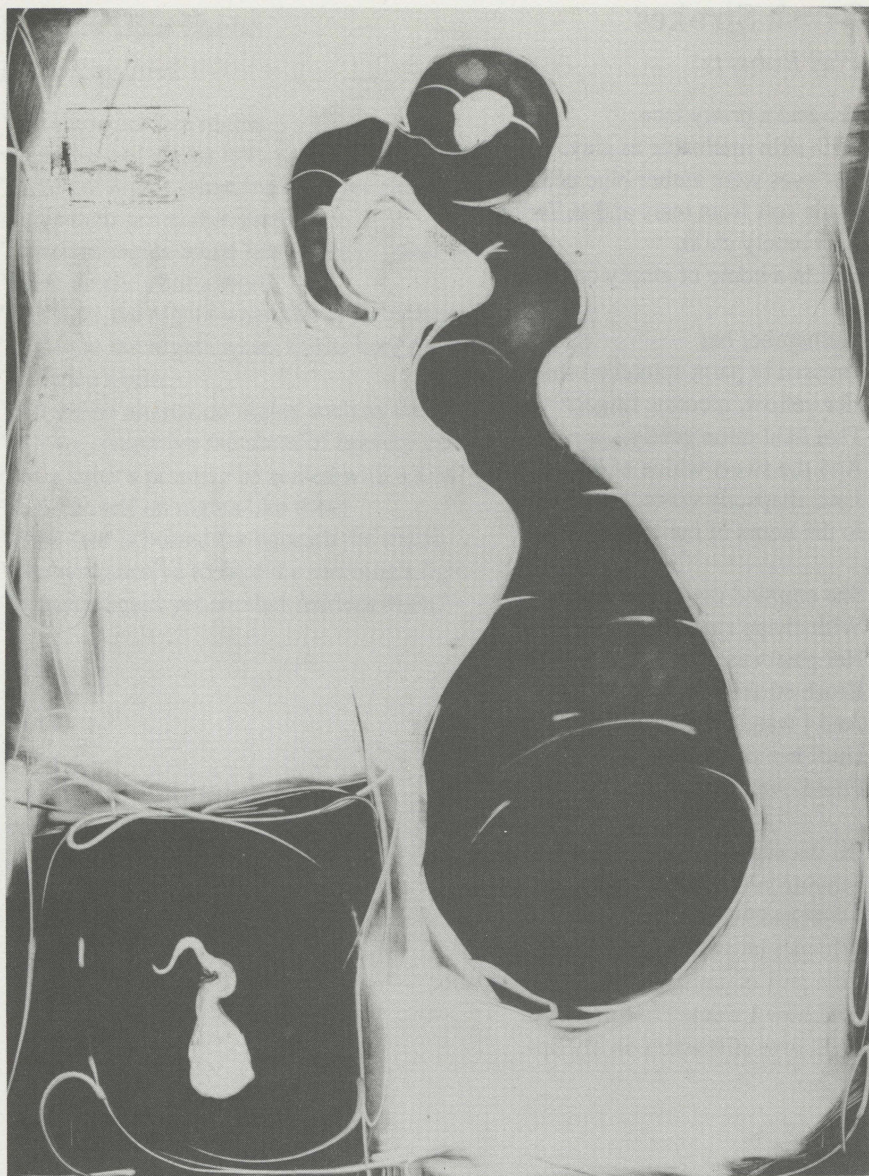
Phil Roberts

She had a pretty face
With skin malleable as clay.
Her eyes were amber blue pearls
Made soft from tears and suffering
As a lonely child,
Left in a home of empty corners.

I remember her
Dressed in paint splotted shirts;
Her yellow, nicotine fingers
That held mine gently,
And the sweet whine of her
Jazz, rhapsody voice, as she sang
In the hours of our fading dawn.

She emptied the spaces of her soul
With cheap canvas and oils.
Her past was smeared, in violent
Brush strokes of sullen colors,
And I watched her starve
Until her skin was a poorly
Fitted overcoat for the rain.

On the night she walked away
Moving silent as her shadows,
I watched her fading form
Whisper into the darkness; a flame
To a puff of smoke, through death's door
And how I wanted to follow her
With love still warm on my lips.



Michael Ousley

Organic Elements

Conte

Rose

Stephanie Wells

Rose Barron was a patient woman, but this particular evening, riding through the countryside in her beat up old Mustang, she found herself getting fed up with every little thing. It had started with the rain. She loved her mid-evening drives when the roads were basically empty and the scenery was beautiful with the sun seeping through the leaves in the trees that engulfed the road like some mythical cave. These things calmed her nerves considerably, yet tonight, the rain had been like an instant depressant to her, causing her view of the world to become cold and damp. The further she drove the further that cold dampness seeped down into the very depths of her soul.

She kept the radio up as loud as she could stand it, not really listening to the music, just letting it drown out the sound of the rain and those monotonous thoughts that kept creeping into her head. She stuck to her usual roads hoping that at any time now the night skies would clear, but she was rapidly losing faith in that hope and she had almost decided to turn and head for home when she saw him. At least she thought it was a him, she couldn't really tell. He was walking along the narrow edge of the little country road, hunched over trying to keep the rain from hitting his face. Rose slowed down just slightly as she passed him, not wanting to get his hopes up for a ride. She still couldn't make out the face but the build was definitely male. He wore a black jacket and blue jeans and he looked cold, wet and miserable. She could relate to this.

Before she even realized what she was doing, she had the car pulled over and was watching him run anxiously towards her. Her heart ran with him and as he hopped into the car her breathing stopped. She clutched the steering wheel with a death grip and decided she would tell the stranger she pulled over because her car was making a funny noise and would he please get out and see if he could hear it. At which point she would hit the gas, hopefully not killing him, then she would get the hell out of dodge before this guy could memorize her face or her car.

She froze instead. She watched him pull the door shut and shake his head, splattering her with fleshy smelling raindrops.

"I really appreciate this." He smiled, turning to face her, but as he did his smile faded until his stare almost matched hers, only, she was sure, not nearly as frightened.

"Relax," he puffed, "I'm not a killer or anything, just an idiot." He looked out the front window surveying the gloomy surroundings, then he smiled at her again. "I should've traded for the truck instead of that damned bike, bad gas mileage is better than gettin' stuck in this shit any day." He laughed at himself and let his eyes wander around the inside of the car. "Nice ride, lady." He smiled again and nodded his head agreeing with himself, "so, do you intend to drive it or did

you just let me in to tease me with dryness and then kick me back out in the rain?"

Rose snapped out of her trance and forced her foot off the break, slowly pulling back out onto the empty road and they were finally on their way. They rode in silence for the first few minutes, then he spoke up again. "Jordan Bright, that's my name. I'm not up to anything really, just headin' to town, I got bored. How about you?"

"Rose." She barely got air behind the word and it came out sounding like a whisper. She kept her eyes on the road concentrating on the task that driving had suddenly become. Rose started to give her last name because the guy was still staring at her like he expected more conversation but she stopped herself. The absurd thought popped into her mind that she was in fact listed in the phone book and, since she still hadn't determined the sanity of her passenger, it might be best to keep small details like last names to herself. He seemed alright so far, but she had heard stories of perfectly normal people who turned into raving lunatics over the phone.

"Take your coat off," she said instead, then quickly added, "you could get sick as wet as you are."

"That's sweet, but, you see, I'm soaked to the bone. Stripping down to the buck couldn't save me now." He snickered to himself and glanced at her, knowing that comment would make her all the more uncomfortable. "Hey rose, you mind if I drink?" He didn't wait for a reply, he reached into his jacket and pulled out a small bottle that rose assumed was something like whisky but she couldn't be sure. Jordan twisted off the top of the bottle, closed his eyes and took a long swallow. He shuddered when the liquid hit his insides. "Jeez! That'll knock it off."

Rose wouldn't look at him. She continued to stare at the road, but she tried to glance at him out of the corner of her eye without looking too obvious. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw him tip the bottle, thinking to herself that this was just perfect. Not only had she picked up a complete stranger out in the middle of nowhere who could yet prove to be a lunatic, he was a complete stranger who was a *drinking* lunatic. She could feel him staring at her and she wanted to face him. She almost felt drawn to his gaze, but she kept herself steady, and a slow pain crept up her neck from the strain of it.

"Cigarette, Rose?" He held out a pack to her and she shook her head violently as if he had offered her a bug. He smiled when she did this and rose cursed herself for how innocent and naive she must look to him.

"I didn't figure you would. I was just bein' polite." He lit his own cigarette and paused, staring at an old abandoned farmhouse as they passed it. "You still nervous, Rose?" He didn't smile when he said this, nor did he laugh, he just said it casual but the question jolted Rose. She glanced at him then shot her eyes back

to the road. "No. Well, yes. A little maybe," she stuttered, "driving kind of, especially in the rain, kind of makes me nervous." She lied of course, driving calmed her, strangers made her nervous, but he didn't need to have that fact confirmed.

"Right," he muttered. He didn't believe her anyway.

"So, Rose, where you goin'? You never did say."

"Town, I guess."

"Joy ridin', eh. Bad night for it, unless you're a rain freak, not meanin' anything to you, I guess rain can be beautiful, it just depends on how each individual sees it. I like it, I guess, for all the obvious reasons, waterin' the earth and all. How about you?"

Rose thought for a minute. "I like it. Not tonight, though. I mean, I'd rather see the stars and the sky and smell the fresh air, you know, rather than, well, this kind of, well, rain." Rose looked at him as she tried to finish her sentence, and he smiled at her. Just for a second, her tension seemed to ease.

"Can I ask you a character question, Rose?" He was still staring at her smiling. She shrugged, indicating she didn't care.

"What's the wildest thing you've ever done? You don't have to answer if you don't want to, I'm just talkin'."

Rose thought about the question. She wasn't sure she had ever done anything wild and after a long pause she remembered one thing. "Well, I'm not sure if you would think it was wild, but I hopped a train once."

Jordan stared at her disbelieving. "You mean like, a moving train?" His eyes widened as Rose nodded.

"Yeah. That's pretty wild, even by my standards. Why'd you do it?"

Rose giggled. "For the fun of it I guess, I never really thought about it." She realized she was smiling and tried to stop herself from looking too comfortable or getting too carried away.

"So you do have a wild streak, Rose, that's good."

"Well," Rose added, "I'm probably not wild in the same sense that you probably are."

"What's that suppose to mean?" He asked defensively. Rose tensed again. "I don't know. I mean, I'm sorry." This is where his insanity begins to surface, she thought.

"Whatever, Rose. I'm no different than you. I enjoy life the way I like to, just like you do. We're all human, and we're all in this life together. You just do what you do best and do it with a passion. What do you do best, Rose?"

She glanced at him sideways, not trusting his apparent mood swing or the question.

"No, no, I don't mean it like that. Don't you have any hobbies or anything?"

Rose shrugged. "No, not really."

"Nothing? Really? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Really?" He sounded genuinely surprised, and Rose almost felt guilty for disappointing him.

"Well, I suppose that I like animals pretty well, I work with them a lot. Not professionally, just because. It's no big deal."

"Hey, if you like it and you're good at it, then it's big. I knew there had to be something." He smiled. Rose smiled back at him this time.

"What about you?" she asked, feeling a small sense of pride for asking him the question this time. He seemed to notice as well and he leaned back in the seat, getting comfortable.

"Well, music. I love music. I started taking guitar lessons when I was seven and I guess it's just sort of become my life. Couldn't live without it."

"Are you in a band or anything?" Another question! She was on a roll now and she began to feel more comfortable, dismissing most of her fears for the first time that evening.

"I play with some of the locals, sometimes. I'll have my own band someday, I hope to, anyway."

Rose wondered about her passenger's age for a moment; he could be much younger than her, still a kid maybe even. Then she began to feel ridiculous at the thought that she might have let a juvenile upset her so much, but, she told herself, he could still have done some damage at his size. If he was a kid, he was a big kid.

"How old are you? If you don't mind me asking?" She finally asked.

"Twenty. How old are you?" He asked matter-of-factly.

"Twenty-four," she piped, suddenly feeling a little more confident. Not necessarily because she was older, but because this little encounter was starting not to feel like such a bad thing. She was beginning to enjoy herself, and Jordan.

"Good God!" Jordan bellowed, "you're twenty-four! Hey, I'm just a kid compared to you!" Rose shot him a mean look but he was laughing at her, and then, she was laughing too.

"I knew I could talk to you, Rose," Jordan said when they reached their destination. Rose pulled the car in to the little cafe parking lot that Jordan had requested to be dropped at. As he got out of the car, Rose examined him for the first time that evening. He caught her doing this but he just smiled and stood there. Rose liked that smile. It was so warm and genuine that she felt a tinge of regret for not having seen it so clearly earlier.

"You've got pretty eyes, Rose, you should look people in the eye more often." Jordan picked his cigarettes off the dash of the car and Rose found herself wishing he weren't leaving just yet.

"My name is Rose Barron, Jordan Bright. Thank you for the company." She

held out her hand to him.

Jordan took it gently. "No problem, thank you for the ride, Rose Barron. You're in the book, right?" He flashed the smile again as he shut the car door.

Rose pulled back out onto the road, with Jordan watching her, and she realized that the evening's rain had stopped, and for some reason, the sky seemed a little bit clearer.



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